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HOW DO RANKINGS IMPACT ON HIGHER EDUCATION?

While university ranking have been part of the US higher education (HE) landscape for decades, the frenzy provoked by publication of the Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking of World Universities and Times QS World University Rankings gives an indication of the seriousness with which many higher education institutions (HEIs), policymakers and the media attach to them. Their increasing credibility derives from their simplicity and provision of 'consumer-type' information independent of the HE sector. Despite 17,000 HEIs worldwide, there is a gladiatorial obsession with the rankings of the top 100. But how much do we know and understand about the influence and impact rankings are having on these various audiences?

Around the world, rankings are published by the media and a wide range of agencies and organizations. As HE has become globalised, the focus has shifted to worldwide rankings. Today, the Shanghai ranking is the 'brand leader'. Each ranking system uses a different set of weighted indicators or metrics to measure higher education activity. Due to the paucity of comparable data for teaching and learning and service/third-mission activities, worldwide rankings are over-reliant on research data and peer review. Other criticism focuses on choice of indicators, weightings and use as quality 'proxies', and bias towards science disciplines and English-language publications.

To understand this phenomenon, IMHE and the IAU sponsored a 2006 study asking how HEIs are responding to rankings, and what impact or influence they are having. Leaders from 202 HEIs in 41 countries participated, representing well-established and new, and teaching intensive, research-informed and research intensive HEIs (Ellen Hazelkorn, *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 19.2 www.oecd.org/edu/imhe/journal).

University leaders believe rankings help maintain and build institutional position and reputation; good students use rankings to 'shortlist' university choice, especially postgraduates; and key stakeholders use rankings to influence their decisions about accreditation, funding, sponsorship and employee recruitment. Respondents say 'reputation derived from league tables is a critical determinant for applicants'. Almost 50% respondents use their institutional rank for publicity purposes, in press releases, official presentations and their website.

58% are unhappy with their position: 70% want to be in the top 10% nationally, and 71% in the top 25% internationally. Over 50% have a formal process to review the results, and 68% use them as a management tool to bring about strategic,

Rankings help maintain and build institutional position and reputation.

organizational, managerial and/or academic change. This includes embedding rankings in 'target agreements' with faculties, establishing a 'new section to monitor rankings', providing 'more scholarships and staff appointments' and ensuring senior staff are well briefed on the significance of improving performance. Some take a more aggressive stance, using rankings to influence not just organisational change but institutional priorities, while others are considering merger or shifting resources from teaching to research.

Rankings also influence national and international partnerships and collaborations. Leaders say they consider a potential partner's rank prior to entering into discussion about research and academic programmes. In addition, rankings influence the willingness of others to partner with them or support their membership of academic/professional associations.

This international experience is replicated in a US study, and the growing international literature. Rankings are important for domestic high-achievers and the lucrative international postgraduate market. Trends suggest high rankings impact positively on the number of applications, philanthropy, graduate recruitment, governing boards, and public policy. Not surprisingly, HE leaders try to influence critical input indicators, e.g. student selectivity or devote resources to activities which may not directly enhance educational quality.

Rankings are a manifestation of global competition and are used as a policy instrument. Many governments proclaim the desire to establish at least one, if not more, 'world class' universities. But what are the costs? Rankings inflate the academic 'arms race' locking institutions and governments into a continual 'quest for ever increasing resources'. A world-class university is \$1b-\$1.5b-a-year operation, plus an additional \$500m if there is a medical school. This would require many HEIs increasing their overall funding by at least 40% (Usher, 2006; Sadlak and Liu 2007). Few societies or (public) institutions can afford this level of investment, without sacrificing other social and economic objectives. Evidence suggests rankings are propelling a growing gap between elite and mass higher education with greater institutional stratification and research concentration. HEIs which do not meet the criteria or do not have 'brand recognition' will effectively be de-valued.

Despite protest and criticism, some form of national and international comparators is useful, inevitable and here to stay. OECD is responding to this challenge by examining how the full range of activities which diverse HEIs engage in, notably teaching and learning, should be measured (see related article page two). IMHE is also represented at meetings of the

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International Rankings Expert Group, which published the Berlin Principles in 2006.

The next phase of the IMHE/IAU study is being conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Higher Education Policy (www.ihep.org) with funding from Lumina Foundation. It will involve interviews with HE leaders, academic staff and students in Germany, Australia and Japan.

Rankings are provoking an important debate about the quality and performance of HEIs, how they should be defined and measured, by whom and for what purpose. There are big policy implications, including a role for educating public opinion and

opinion formers - many of whom make ambitious statements without understanding their full impact for higher education and society.

Professor Ellen Hazelkorn has been spending part of her sabbatical from Dublin Institute of Technology with IMHE pursuing work on the impact of rankings on institutional behavior. Ellen would be interested in hearing from anyone who has evidence of how rankings are impacting on or influencing on either their institution or higher education system.

To contact Ellen Hazelkorn: ellen.hazelkorn@oecd.org

OECD INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION OUTCOMES

The OECD is considering the development of an assessment of higher education learning outcomes that would allow comparison between higher education institutions across countries. We are now in the process of planning a feasibility study to determine whether such a comparison is scientifically and practically possible.

The aim is to assess what undergraduate degree students know and can do in order to provide better information to higher education institutions, governments, and other stakeholders including students and employers. The motivation is that this information could contribute to higher education institutions' knowledge of their own teaching performance, and thereby provide a tool for development and improvement.

The rapid growth in higher education – number of students and institutions – and its increasing internationalisation, has led to attention to its quality and relevance. OECD Ministers of Education meeting in Athens in June 2006 asked OECD for advice on how better to understand and evaluate the various dimensions of quality in higher education.

Existing international comparisons of higher education institutions focus on research, measured by proxies such as the number of published articles, citations, and Nobel Prize winners, or on resource inputs. There is no reliable comparative information on what students have learned or can do as a result of their time at university.

At the same time, rankings – whether national or international – are clearly having an impact on public opinion, institutional decision-making and individual choices.

Given the importance of higher education for human capital development, its cost to public finances and to individuals and their families, and the needs of business and industry, OECD's ambition is to develop a measure that gives due weight to teaching and learning.

Measurement of educational outcomes is complicated and controversial. If it is poorly done, it may lead to distortion in decision-making. Making assessments that are valid across institutions, cultures and disciplines presents numerous scientific and practical challenges.

Amongst these are how to take account of:

- the diversity of institutions: from specialised to comprehensive in discipline coverage; international in reach or more locally-oriented; highly selective or open to all
- differences between national systems of higher education:

relations between government and institutions; the proportion of students entering higher education;

- variations in the duration and content of programmes.
- cultural and linguistic diversity
- accounting for the value added by institutions.

And then there are the practical and operational challenges of how to motivate students and institutions to participate, and ensuring fair assessment of the results.

The first stage has therefore been to consult a number of international experts in seeking to define the scope of the task. Three meetings have been held. The outcome of these meetings is a proposal for the design and implementation of a feasibility study to be conducted in 2008 and 2009.

It is expected that the assessment will be based on a written test of the competences of students who are almost at the end of a Bachelor programme. The suggestion is that it should consist of a test of those transversal critical thinking and problem solving skills that are necessary for success in both academic and business contexts, combined with a subject specific test relating to one or at most two disciplines.

It is expected that in order to provide a reliable test of the theory and the practicality of the concept it will be necessary to involve a small number of institutions in each of a small number of countries – maybe four to six. Participating institutions need to be sufficiently different to provide a cross-section of the sector, even though they will not be fully representative of the diversity of the sector. The sample will include some prominent institutions and some which are less known, and where appropriate a mix of private and public institutions.

Institutional support is essential to the success of what some people are calling 'a PISA for higher education', and that is why the OECD is involving the IMHE Governing Board in its work. The most critical factor for the success of the feasibility study is the willingness of the institutions to take part

If the feasibility study goes well and results are available late in 2009, then field trials of the assessment may begin in the following year. Only then will countries and institutions be in a position to decide whether, and how, they want to take a fully-fledged assessment forward.

Constructing an assessment of higher education outcomes means developing new measures, and a new methodology. It is not the aim of the OECD to establish a new ranking of higher education institutions. But it is our intention to explore whether it is possible to provide new elements of knowledge and understanding about what it is that students have learned and can do - just as the PISA study has done for 15 year-olds. This knowledge will inform policy and practice and can only be positive.

The IMHE welcomes the following new members:

- > Charles Darwin University – Australia
- > Handong Global University – Korea
- > Universidad Miguel Hernandez – Spain
- > American Council on Education – USA

CITY UNIVERSITY OF SEATTLE

Relying on its global and innovative approaches City University of Seattle-CityU has established campuses in several Asian, American and European countries. One of these campuses, Vysoká Škola Manažmentu-VSM in Bratislava and Trencin, the first private institution of higher education in Slovakia, now becomes a partner of CityU. It is fully accredited and recognized in Slovakia. IMHE former colleague Jacqueline Smith recently took part in the evaluation of VSM on behalf of EUA. She reports on a dynamic institution which, faced with many challenges in this country undergoing economic and political transition, succeeded in building its reputation as a provider of qualified professionals: graduates have no difficulty finding employment in Slovakia after graduation. VSM is pioneering flexible forms of education in Slovakia: teaching offered in English and in Slovak, with options to go for accredited BSBA and MBA degrees in either language or both; provision of interactive online courses for working adult students; the possibility to enroll at four different times during the academic year; commitment to quality lifelong learning as well as to initial post secondary education. In addition, research activities in the fields of management or teaching methodologies are expanding; and the institution is engaged in meeting all the requirements of the Bologna process.

HEIS AND REGIONS: THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING NEW

In 2004, IMHE, in collaboration with the OECD Territorial Development and Public Governance Directorate, launched a review of HEIs and their regional engagement. The project “*Supporting the Contribution of Higher Education Institutions to Regional Development*” has now come to an end. What was learned from the biggest project in the history of IMHE? And what are the next steps?

ICT revolution has brought along “a death of distance” where, in principle, any place with internet connection can participate in the knowledge economy. At the same time, globalisation has increased the comparative advantage of regions that create the best conditions for growth. In fact, there are growing gaps between regions as innovation continues to cluster around vibrant communities, skilled people and HEIs. Investing in regional innovation systems improves economic competitiveness. Regional engagement and world class research excellence can be complementary goals for HEIs, the one reinforcing the other.

How to mobilise Higher Education for development?

The final report *Higher Education and Regions – Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged* points important general issues that need to be considered by HEIs, their local and regional stakeholders and the national governments.

Stronger links are necessary HEIs and regions. HEIs should engage in the development and implementation of urban and regional strategies. They should also widen their service portfolio to embrace the whole range of issues ranging from economic to social, cultural and environmental development.

Governments can support this work by increasing HEIs’ responsibility over their



Mercedes Cabrera, Minister, Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, Spain and Angel Gurria, Secretary-General, OECD.

curriculum and the use of human, financial and physical resources. Enhancing institutional autonomy is, however, not enough. Proper incentive structures and accountability schemes need to be put in place to facilitate a step change. Finally, HEIs themselves must change. They must become professionally managed entrepreneurial organisations and involve students and staff in the regional development activities. Initiatives to promote community service need to be integrated in the teaching and research functions of the HEIs.

Next steps

OECD will continue to work with regions and HEIs. New reviews will focus on rapidly developing economies, G8 countries and city regions. An opportunity for re-evaluation will be offered to the 14 regions. OECD will also work to develop reliable indicators and to provide a forum to enhance partnership-building process between governments, universities and regions.

MORE INFORMATION

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www.oecd.org/edu/higher/regionaldevelopment

The report *Higher Education and Regions – Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged* is available in English, Spanish and French, and soon also in Chinese.

MORE INFORMATION

www.cityu.edu/index.aspx

www.vsm.sk/index.php?id=31039

PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST



Higher Education and Regions: Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged

OECD Publishing, ISBN-10: 9264034145

This publication explores a range of helpful policy measures and institutional reforms. Drawing from an extensive review of 14 regions across 12 countries as well as OECD territorial reviews, it considers the regional engagement of higher education regarding teaching, research and service to the community. It offers answers to the following questions: What is higher education's regional engagement all about? What are its drivers and barriers? What does regional engagement mean for the governance and management of higher education institutions, for regions and for nations? And how does regional engagement fit in with the pursuit of world class academic excellence?



Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators in a Changing World: Responding to Policy Needs

OECD Publishing, ISBN-10: 9264039651

As the world interconnects, science, technology and innovation policies cannot be seen as standing alone. There is a growing interest from central banks and ministries of finance in improving the understanding of how science, technology and innovation create value in the form of increased productivity and profits, and contribute to the valuation of enterprises, and ultimately stimulate the growth and competitiveness of economies. This conference proceedings of the OECD Blue Sky II Forum describes some of the policy needs, measurement issues, and challenges in describing cross-cutting and emerging topics in

science, technology and innovation (STI). It also presents ideas to exploit existing data and develop new frameworks of measurement in order to guide future development of STI indicators at the OECD and beyond.



Gaining from Migration: Towards a New Mobility System

OECD Publishing, ISBN-10: 9264037403

This report presents a summary of recommendations on how we can all gain from migration. They are the result of a multi-faceted project undertaken in partnership with the European Commission to rethink the management of the emerging mobility system. New ideas, based on an exhaustive review of past policy experiences in Europe and elsewhere, are offered for policies related to labour markets, integration, development co-operation and the engagement of diasporas.



Higher Education Management and Policy: Volume 19 Issue 2

OECD Publishing, SUB-89011P1

The journal of the OECD Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education. Appearing three times each year, this journal covers practice and policy in the field of system and institutional management through articles and reports on research of wide international scope. This issue features articles on academic values and institutional management, the university and its communities, league tables, performance ranking, research universities in developing countries, and the diversifying workforce.

IMHE CALENDAR

22-23 May 2008

Spaces and Places for Learning

Innovation and Knowledge Transfer in collaboration with the OECD Programme on Educational Building and the Helsinki University of Technology, Helsinki, Finland

Contact: alastair.blyth@oecd.org

5-6 June 2008

The Emerging Global University Market in collaboration with the Nordic University Association and the Nordic Association of university Administrators, Reykjavik, Iceland

Contact: jaana.puukka@oecd.org

21-22 August 2008

"What works" conference. *Academic enterprise or the enterprise academy? embedding meanings, values and practice*, CHEMPaS, University of Southampton, United Kingdom

Contact: fabrice.henard@oecd.org

8-10 Sept. 2008

IMHE General Conference *Outcomes of higher education: quality, relevance and Impact*, Paris, France

Contact: www.oecd.org/edu/imhegeneralconference2008

OTHER MEETINGS OF INTEREST

17-18 April 2008

Higher Education under Market Conditions: Theory and Practice

Mykolas Romeris University, Ateities 20, Vilnius, Lithuania

Contact: justina@mruni.lt

17-21 August 2008

16th International Meeting of University Administrators, Vancouver, Canada

www.imua2008.ca



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